Castlemaine Naturalist

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The Big Trivia Night

The Castlemaine Field Naturalists fielded team of 10 genii (?) to defeat all comers at the "Conservation is not Trivial" trivia night, but the cards were stacked against us - we didn't know half the people or organisations that we needed to to win ! We did well on the natural history questions though!

We had great fun even if we did come second last, one point behind the Box-Ironbark people. At least we were only one of three teams who were able to put names to the dots representing the main towns of the Loddon-Campaspe Region, and we think we had the best poem, written by Penny and Nina - only the judges didn't think so. We'll let you judge for yourselves how good it is - I think the subject was "Biodiversity" -

On each other depends each living thing.
The increasing salinity is most threatening.
First to the flora
Which, (because it is now poorer)
Endangers the fauna - the prickly and cuddly.
Salinity; the result of the greedy and ugly
Clearers of land for timber and ore -
When they take a lot, they always want more!!

We live in a unique and ancient land
From the coastal beach to dunes of sand.
Man came in with a heavy hand
And changed this great brown land
Not for better, but for worse

Rather like this bit of verse!

****

A thought gleaned by Chris Morris -

"A reason I like to be among bird watchers and field naturalists is that I can often pass for normal" !!!????

Hindmarsh Biolink Project Tree Planting Weekend

August 10 & 11

What a wonderful experience this was for me to be involved in the annual tree planting which has taken place over the last 5 years linking the Big and Little Deserts. Last year completed the planting of trees, understorey and native grasses along the entire network of road reserves criss-crossing between the two National Parks. The aim this year was to plant 28,000 plants to enhance the Biolink through revegetation on previous roadside sites and private property. Private landholders are increasingly setting aside land for native plant restoration. Some of the sites set aside by them are critical to the survival of many species of flora and fauna unique to the region.

The Little Desert Lodge was our base, most of the volunteers choosing to camp This was the hub of the massive organization of 250 planters. We were extremely well fed and watered over the entire weekend by local service organizations.

What a sight it was to see volunteers snaking along the rip lines at a rapid rate, driven on by great camaraderie and team spirit. I was involved in planting out biodiversity squares; hundreds of smaller plants and native grasses very close together to provide a seed base for the rest of the area. We were reminded by Ron Dodds, the Coordinator of the Wimmera Region for Greening Australia, that we were not landscape gardeners so did not need to separate the species! "Plant them in blocks!" was the cry.

Conservationists are hopeful that such projects as these will make the environmentally destructive Mallee dust storm such that hit Melbourne in 1983 a thing of the past.

Margaret Badminton

(Ref.: John Stirling VNPA Park Watch Dec. 2001)

Living in a Dry Land

Over the four weeks we were away during July one thing really impressed me, and that was the way everything belonging to this land of ours seems to cope with drought far better than what was introduced from wetter climates such as Europe. Even in drought, stations which haven't been over-cleared or overstocked still give the impression of health and hanging on when places which have been cleared and sown with improved pasture and crops look far worse - or so I thought. Time and time again my thought was "Perhaps its high time we learnt to work with the land instead of against it." That I felt particularly when we were in the arid areas which are being used for cotton growing. Don't get me wrong, I wear cotton most of the time, but there must be a better way and a better place for growing it!

Despite dry conditions we thoroughly enjoyed our trip, though much of the country looked quite different from the same time last year - green was replaced by yellow, and yellow by grey, and grey by red.

We stayed two nights at Hay and visited the Hay wetlands - for that read "Hay Sewerage Ponds"! - and I saw a Spotless Crake for the first time. I was surprised at how small they are. I'd visualised something nearly the size of a moorhen. Our next destination was Cobar, and we had to stay at a Motel instead of the Caravan Park, but the park managers let us go in to look for the Spotted Bowerbird which I eventually tracked down - in a Peppercorn Tree eating peppercorns. Very much an acquired taste I should think.

We stayed two nights at Cunnamulla and visited Eulo and Nine Mile bore, hoping to see Hall's Babblers. We didn't see Halls, but we did watch Grey-crowned Babblers for ten or fifteen minutes, and Doug got a quite reasonable video of them.

We took the shorter route from Cunnamulla to Quilpie this time, turning off the Thargomindah road a few kilometres out of Eulo, as we were told Lake Bindigolly was almost dry, and I thought we would miss the worst of the dirt road - but we found some much better ruts and bulldust holes instead. It was on this road that we saw the worst drought affected scrub where, in a couple of patches, even the mulgas were looking stressed. In this area we saw no birds for about 60 kms, even when we stopped at the side of the road for lunch.

Our three days on Tenham Station added a few more birds to the list that was made on last year's trip, even though the country looked much drier and Kyabra Creek was lower. Biggest surprise for me was finding about eight Green Tree-frogs (including two Red-eyed Green Tree-frogs) and 3 small brown tree frogs in the toilet cistern. I didn't think they belonged to that area at all, but we were assured that they do. Sometimes up to two hundred have been crowded along the window ledges, up the window ledges, and in the toilets at the Homestead! The family members are not very enamoured of them at all!

Last time we saw no lizards either; this time I found a tiny Marbled Velvet Gecko in the kitchen of the shearers quarters.

We spent one day visiting Windorah area. We spent an hour or so on Cooper Creek, which was also much lower, and there were fewer birds, than last year. We had a look around Windorah itself, including the museum, had lunch there, and then headed out to the sandhills beyond. I found a Desert Grevillea *Grevillea juncifolia* in flower, and photographed it on the way back from where we'd climbed a sandhill (we'd gone 20 kms and knew

we'd missed the track up to *the* sandhill.) After parking in the shade of the grevillea it suddenly dawned on us that we were parked right next to the track up onto *the* sandhill. After I'd done my bit of photography we decided that the track would be OK, so off we set - but at the top I pleaded with Doug to go no further - I didn't really have to, because he'd already decided that the sand was getting a bit soft, and if we got over the top we'd really be in a pickle, so while he carefully backed all the way back I photographed the Green Birdflower that we'd pulled up next to - so that was another ambition satisfied.

One of the bird species I wanted to show Doug was the Spinefex Pigeons, and I thought we had missed out until we were having breakfast on the last morning, and several trotted past the doorway. Out came the video camera and the camera with the slide film., but the light was behind them and our host drove up while I was trying to sneak around behind them - so, of course, I need to go back again to get another chance at a photo of them!

Before we left Tenham we were also shown the Spotted Bower-birds' nest which was under a weeping tree about 15 metres from the back gate at the homestead. Grass is arched over similar to a Satin Bowerbirds' bower, but the ground at the sides is covered with shiny, white objects, and in front by orange, light red and some yellow objects, particularly ear tagsintended for the cattle.

We saw the other bird species I badly wanted to see just before we got back to Quilpie. Doug spotted a pair of Bustards at the side of the road, and they, too, were videoed and photographed.

We saw Blue-billed and Pink-eared Ducks - in a small drainage dam at the end of the street near the Caravan Park - Cockatiel, Red-winged Parrots and Budgerigars at Quilpie, a juvenile Black-breasted Buzzard 36 km before Charleville (it was the white wing-spots on this most impressive bird which caught my eye), Mallee Ringnecks and Pale-headed Rosellas at Charleville - and two Black-shouldered Kites hovering nearby while we were out for a walk is a sight which we both will remember for a long time. More next month.

Rita Mills

The Large Ironbarks at Bung Bong

The Club excursion on Sat 9th August was to see some of the large ironbarks on private property adjacent to the Bung Bong Forest. The ironbarks were a contrast to the trees in the regrowth forest on the public land. The diameter of the trunks and the spread of the branches was in excess of any that I can remember seeing. It is thought that trees of this size would once have been abundant in the goldfields forests.

If this is so, how do we get the forest back to what it was like before European settlement, and the coming of timber-getting, mining, grazing and feral animals?

It was obvious that the paddock has been extensively grazed. We were told that domestic stock have been removed for some years. However, many of the plants showed signs of recent grazing. There was also evidence of fairly recent tree-felling, and there were many sapling eucalypts. The understorey was sparse.

One management proposal for ironbark forests is that forest be thinned, and the stumps poisoned, to prevent coppice growth. If this were done, the remaining trees should grow more strongly, and reach maturity more rapidly. Such management would be, I think, a risky procedure. There are many seedling eucalypts present between the old ironbarks, and so, if the number of trees is to be limited, there would have to be continuing removal of the seedlings. The effect of thinning on the understorey is not known. An open forest would also be more attractive to some weeds. Cape Broom, for example, readily colonises opened forest. Nor do we know about the importance of sapling eucalypts to the ecology of the forest. Certainly thinning and poisoning, if any, should be in a very limited scale, and carefully assessed for many years, before large scale thinning takes place.

In the Western District there are many areas where there are large, mature Red Gums, that are well spaced, and without regeneration. The understorey is grazed, and native understorey is almost or completely absent. This landscape should be no more an indication that Red Gum forests be managed by thinning, than management of the ironbark forests by thinning.

The ironbark forest on public land at Bung Bong had much more understorey than the private land. It would be interesting to see the effect of removal of the intense grazing pressure on the large-treed area.

The wattle. There was some discussion about the identity of a lone wattle growing on the property. Was it Whirrakee Wattle or a narrow-leaved form of Hakea Wattle? I think the latter. Some of the characteristics of the wattle, and Hakea Wattle, are the colour of the phyllodes (the leaves, green to yellowish green, not semi-glaucous) and the eccentric midrib, the number of flowers in the flower balls (30-40, compared to about 20 or less for Whirrakee Wattle), the length of the peduncles (flower stalks), and the angle at which the phyllodes are held. The two species are however, closely related, and Whirrakee Wattle was once considered to be a variety of Hakea Wattle.

Ern Perkins.

Observations and Specimens

A plea from the editor! Please write down your observations and hand them to me. Some people have very soft voices, and I am hard of hearing into the bargain! Ed.

- On 5/8, a Red-capped Robin in the Buda grounds. Rita Mills et al.
- George Evans brought an green ootheca (egg case) of one of the larger mantis species for the Specimen table. Another specimen was half a dozen lacewing eggs fastened by a fine stalk to a piece of bark.
- Wattles are starting to flower in earnest (9/8). Cootamundras, Golden Wattle (several sources) and Acacia lanigera (Woolly Wattle), Richard Piesse.
- Richard also brought a specimen of Sticky Boronia (B. anemonifolia) which was coming into flower in the Irishtown area. He also reported a Masked Lapwing nesting at the side of the road in William St. and Black-tailed Native Hens at Middleton's Creek.
- It was noted by several people that the Yellow Gums and Ironbarks have had almost no flowering this year.
- More and more Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos are being reported - 60 or so over Kalimna by Brian McCormick and Robyn Holden, later over Wheeler Street by George Broadway. Dredges had seen them on 9/8 near their place, and someone phoned the editor a few days later to report about 40 in the West End area. Later in the month a report came from Malcolm Heaslip for Blakeley Road.
- Hans van Gemert noted that the Scented Sundews are flowering. These were also seen on the outing to Bung Bong forest next day.
- .George Broadway reported that their resident Blue-tongue appeared to sun itself on Sat. August 17.
- Geraldine Harris has been finding Marbled Geckoes in the house, including in the woodbox.

The Changing Vegetation of the Castlemaine Forests

The understorey of the local bushland appears to be sparser than in former years. Close inspection shows that many of the shrubs have been severely pruned back, presumably by kangaroos or wallabies. Some shrubs, such as Daphne Heath and Coffee Bush, appear to be unappetising to the browsers.

An interesting project would be to list the plants that are heavily grazed, lightly grazed and not grazed at all.

At the coming meeting we will start to compile the lists. Your input is requested

Ern Perkins

U3A/FNC Bird Group

Only four people went on the outing to Expedition Pass on 22/8. It was a beautiful morning, and we made a list of 25 birds, including a very noisy flock of Crimson Rosellas, a Brown Goshawk, two flocks of Choughs and lots of Blue Wrens. We have decided to conduct 2 more outings, but commencing at the **new time of 9.30am.** We will decide whether to continue these outings at the end of the two months trial.

Rita Mills

FROM THE BUSINESS MEETING, 22/8/02

Survey on **Meins Road**, for TSN network. The Club is contributing towards the network by doing needed surveys. This one is to be held on **Monday 21 Oct. Meet at 9 am on** the corner of **Meins Road** on the Muckleford/Yapeen Rd. A barbecue lunch will follow at Margaret Badminton's, Yapeen.

The **Broom Pull** went well, and it was felt that the ad. in the paper was worth while, as we had several additional keen workers as a result. The dense area on the island still needs to be dealt with, and it has been decided to use brush-cutters and loppers, followed by painting the cut stems with Roundup or such. This **working bee** will be held on **Friday Sept. 27**, commencing at **9 am. Meet at the corner of May St. and Froomes Rd.** Bring loppers if you have them, and morning tea. Darren Bos and Peter Johnson are to be informed.

We have been approached in connection with the **Commuting Connections** project, which involves (see the Midland Express, 20/8/02) the placement of artwork and sculptures along the walking track (part of the Great Dividing Trail) from Castlemaine to Chewton.

The Launch of the Community Consultation of the Community Connections Project will be held in the Art Gallery on Monday Sept. 16 at 7.30pm

Two workshops will be also be held

1 . On Sat. Sept. 21 from 2 - 5pm at the Chewton Community Centre

2. On Mon. Sept. 23 from 7.30 - 10 pm at the Ray Bradfield Rooms.

Disclaimer - The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributors and not necessarily those of the club.

2002 Committee E. Perkins (President) ph 5472 3124, C. Morris (V.P. and Grievance Officer), G. Broadway (Sec.). ph. 5472 2513, H. van Gemert (treas.), R. Mills (N/L Ed. and P.O.), M. Badminton, G. Harris, B. Maund, M. Oliver, R. Piesse.

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club, PO Box 324, Castlemaine.

Incorporation #A0003010

Program

General meetings are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) hall at 8.00 pm on the second Friday of each month, except January.

Excursions leave promptly at the times stated, usually on the Saturday after the general meeting. There are NO excursions on total fire ban days. Also note that outdoor excursions are likely to be cancelled in extreme weather conditions.

Business meetings are held at 27 Doveton Street on the 4th Thursday of each month, except December, at 7.30 pm. All members are invited to attend.

Visitors are welcome at club meetings and excursions.

Fri Sept. 13. Bill and Robyn van Smeerdijk *Namibia, SW Africa.* UCA at 8.00pm

Sat Sept. 14. ***Conglomerate Gully.*** Riddells Creek. Leader is Penny Garnett. Leave 27 Doveton St at 10.00 am. Take lunch and afternoon tea, and stout footwear.

Wed. Sept. 18. Wednesday afternoon outing in Spring. The first for 2002. Leader: Margaret Badminton. Meet at the Octopus (opposite the motel, Duke St) at 4 pm.

Wed. Sept. 25. pm outing no 2. Leader: Geraldine Harris. Octopus at 4.00 pm.

Fri. Sept. 27 Broom Clearing. Meet at the corner of Froomes Road and Mary St at 9am. Details p.7.

Wed. Oct. 2. pm outing no 3. Leader: Richard Piesse. Octopus, 4.00 pm.

Wed. Oct. 9. pm outing no 4. Leaders: Ken and Maureen Dredge. Octopus, 4.00 pm.

Fri. Oct. 11. Dr David McLaren ***The biological control of weeds.*** Dr McLaren is from the Keith Turnbull Institute.

Sat Oct. 12. Mt. Alexander and Great Dividing Trail. A walk along part of the Great Dividing Trail. Leader: Richard Piesse.

Wed. Oct. 16. pm outing no 5. Leader: Margaret Panter. Octopus, 4.00 pm.

Mon. Sept. 21 Survey, Meins Road. Meet 9am. Details p. 7

Fri. 25, Sat 26 & Sun 27 Oct. . ***VFNCA camp at Ballarat.*** The Victorian Field Naturalists Clubs Association Spring Camp will be held this year at Ballarat and conducted by the Field Naturalists Club of Ballarat. There are full and half-day excursions on Saturday, and excursions on Sunday morning. On Friday evening there will be an introductory slide show, and the Ballarat FNC 50th Anniversary Dinner will be held on Saturday evening, when the guest speaker will be Tim O'Ombrain, who will speak on *Local Conservation Issues.* Information and booking sheets can be obtained from E Perkins.

If you have not yet attended a VFNCA campout, why not start with this campout?

Fri. Nov. 8 Sharon Ford *Lichens* . UCA at 8.00pm.

Sat. Nov. 9. Bullarto Reservoir. *Bullarto lichens.* Leave CHIRP at 1.30pm sharp. Leader is Sharon Ford.

Fri. Dec. 13.Members and Visitors Night. Start thinking now about what you could contribute. UCA hall. 8pm.

Subscriptions for 2002 Ordinary Membership: Single ,$22 Family, $30
Pensioner or student: Single $19 Family $24.
Supporting: $31

The subscription also covers postage of the 'Castlemaine Naturalist'.